



UNIVERSITY OF KANSAS MEDICAL CENTER

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SCHOOL OF MEDICINE
DEPARTMENT OF PATHOLOGY AND ONCOLOGY

August 21, 1967

Mr. Harold Weisberg
Coq d'Or Press
Hyattstown, Maryland 20734

Dear Mr. Weisberg:

Please allow me to thank you for your letter of August 2 and I hope you will pardon my delay in answering. It is due to press of work.

Reading copy of my letter to you of July 29 reveals that I did, in fact, ask you for material you have collected in relation to the Kennedy autopsy. I am aghast at this. What I really want, of course, are citations, etc., which will appear in your book, after it is published, so that I can obtain the same data. Of course I would be delighted to have any copies of this you would send together with any unused data. I am adept only in medical bibliography. It will still be a few months before I have a manuscript ready and I am anxiously looking forward to receiving a copy of your book.

I may be able to answer your question about the minimum requirements of an autopsy. An autopsy in case of natural death may be done, with permission of next of kin, by any physician "duly licensed" by the Board of Medical Examiners in the state in question. Such an autopsy may also be done by a physician not so licensed but must be done under supervision of such a licensed physician. This is the usual case of a "Resident" studying or training in pathology at a teaching hospital of a medical school. The resident usually gets his state license a year or so after graduation from medical school and after four years study of pathology is eligible for an examination leading to the "Certificate" of the American Board of Pathology.

For a "legal-autopsy" or "coroner's case" the laws of 49 states require that the coroner designate a person who is "duly licensed" by the state in question. In fact, the coroner usually designates a somewhat senior person who also holds the "certificate" of the American Board of Pathology if he can find one who is willing. In the 50th State of Connecticut it is a legal requirement that the pathologist be "certified". In a few states the laws are quite loose and the coroner himself can legally do the autopsy even if he is a truck driver in complete ignorance of things medical!!!!!! The prosecutor must approach his legal problem somewhat differently than the usual hospital autopsy. All unnecessary personnel must be gotten out of the vicinity and only, perhaps, one assistant be present. This prevents, in part, subsequent conflicts which now prevail in the Kennedy case. Thirty or so were present at Kennedy's autopsy. Of course, defense counsel may request their own observer

to be present. The body must be absolutely identified. The protocol on the late President does not indicate that he was identified!!!! The body must be weighed, measured and inspected all over; all orifices must be examined, especially the vagina in the female. Sketches with measurements must be made of any unusual findings together with color and black-white pictures. These photographs should be taken by the pathologist himself so one less person will be subpoenaed for the defense to tangle up at trial. They should also be developed by the pathologist himself. Entry and exit bullet holes must be recorded with precision. The pathologist himself should x-ray the body completely. The films must be developed and inspected prior to starting the autopsy; this may require 15 minutes but knowing the number and position of bullets is important as well as broken bones, tips of knife blades, etc. The pathologist keeps the film negatives himself to use at trial.

The remainder of the autopsy is somewhat like the usual hospital case. Of course, blood must be drawn for subsequent possible examination for poisons as alcohol, barbiturates, etc. All organs must be removed and inspected very carefully and photographs made with sketches of anything unusual. Samples of stomach content, liver, kidney, spleen, and brain must be preserved fresh in plastic sacks and frozen in a deep freeze for possible subsequent study for poisons. Especially urine must be preserved for possible study for barbiturates, etc. Representative sections of all organs must be taken and fixed in formaldehyde, this is whether they appear unusual or normal. Bullets must be kept separate because the deceased may have been shot from two or more guns and one bullet is found in a vital spot while the others are found in a lesser site. The prosecutor must keep the bullets, measure them with calipers, weigh them on an analytical balance, scratch his name on the nose or other place without rifling marks and give them to a person designated by the coroner and obtain a receipt. (Hair and nail clippings may be taken for arsenic study, etc.) The body must not be released until the prosecutor is satisfied that the cause of death is at hand. He then writes for the coroner a "PAD" or provisional anatomical diagnosis and on this indicates that he is holding, frozen in a deep freeze to which he only has the key, hair, clippings of nails, stomach contents, blood, urine, and various organs, and asks the coroner to advise about the disposition.

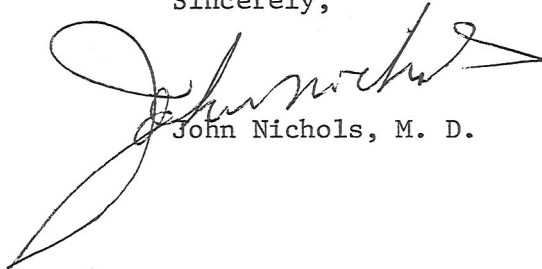
After the various tissues, brain, heart, kidneys, liver, spleen, gonads and all other tissues of the body have fixed for a day in formaldehyde they are trimmed and given to the "tissue technicians" with the code number of the case. These girls dehydrate the tissues, mount them in paraffin blocks, and cut sections a few thousandths of an inch in thickness. The paraffin is removed, the sections re-hydrated, and stained and mounted on thin glass slides. The sections are studied by the pathologist with the microscope. This is where the major part of pathology enters in the ordinary hospital case, as in diagnosing tumors. The actual dissection of the body in the usual case is of lesser importance. After all tissues have been studied, this may require a month and if bones are involved, two months, a final autopsy protocol is written up completely and nothing omitted, and the pathologist expresses his opinion as to

cause of death. This complete protocol is submitted to the coroner and/or prosecuting attorney who use the data to apprehend and convict the guilty or acquit the innocent. The pathologist does not deal with the press. Of course the microscopic slides and unused portions of tissues or organs are kept forever under appropriate code number. After the case is adjudicated some duplicate specimens may be thrown away.

Microscopic examination of tissue constitutes the most important part of pathology, dissection of the body a lesser part but in murders may be adequate by itself. Cases are on record where the deceased was shot in the head and chest six times while asleep in bed. The accused confessed. However, microscopic examination of the heart revealed death occurred four hours prior to shooting. The accused was released because you cannot kill a dead man.

Shall look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "John Nichols", with a large, sweeping flourish extending from the bottom left.

John Nichols, M. D.

JN:lc